



By Halimah Abdullah
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WASHINGTON -- Secretary of Veteran Affairs Eric Shinseki testified Wednesday that his office would work to improve how veterans returning from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are treated.

"It is our intent to continue to uphold our obligations to our veterans when these conflicts have subsided, something that we have not always done in the past," Shinseki told members of the House Appropriations Committee's subcommittee on military construction and veterans affairs. "Not upholding these obligations in the past has left at least one generation of veterans struggling in anonymity for decades. We, who sent them, owe them better."

His statements to the committee coincide with Rep. Sanford Bishop's push to get the VA to improve its treatments of vets. Bishop, whose district includes portions of Columbus, is the ranking Democrat on the committee.

"We have asked a new generation of heroes to sacrifice on behalf of our country and we have an obligation to take care of them when they come home," Bishop said at the hearing. "We all know that the VA can and should improve the service and support it provides to our veterans, and we must work together to address the huge challenges facing the department."

Bishop, D-Albany, questioned Shinseki about the large backlog of veterans claims and the

department's progress in helping homeless veterans. Bishop last week asked the Department of Veterans Affairs' inspector general's office similar questions about the claims backlog.

The VA is also under fire from some Democratic and Republican leaders on various veterans affairs congressional committees over missing the January deadline to fully enact the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 and for limiting benefits for caregivers of soldiers seriously injured in Iraq and Afghanistan. The law includes provisions that help provide support for the caregivers of seriously injured Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, helps improve services for the nation's 1.8 million women veterans, helps expand the availability of health care for veterans and increases services to prevent veterans from becoming homeless.

The subcommittee has added \$27 billion to the VA's budget since 2007, including a 75 percent increase to the Veterans Health Administration, which administers the VA's medical assistance program, Bishop pointed out. In his testimony before the committee, Shinseki said that while the increased funding has helped and the agency has made some progress, he still has much work to do.

"Our requirements have grown over the past two years as we addressed longstanding issues from past wars and watched the requirements for those fighting the current conflicts grow significantly," Shinseki said. "These needs will continue long after the last American combatant departs Iraq and Afghanistan."